

The Ohio State University Commencement
December 12, 2010
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Welcome parents, distinguished guests and colleagues, and congratulations to the class of 2010! Or, as I have come to know you, class t-minus-7 until semesters.

At the outset, I have a favor to ask. As an administrator in the college of engineering, I've seen what it takes to make this day a reality. Academic advisors across campus work tirelessly solving those last minute problems so that we can all celebrate today. So when you wake up on Tuesday, look up your academic advisor and write them a thank you. And if you are one of those who just got transfer credit evaluated this past week, I suggest flowers or chocolate.

One of the truly enjoyable parts of my job is the opportunity to hand out diplomas at graduation. I've been on this stage for several commencement speeches and never dreamed that I would be the one up here at some point. I do want you to know what a tremendous honor it is to be asked to do this. When I first got the invitation I was a little shocked and my first question to President Gee was "Can I use equations?" Then I started thinking like an engineer and analyzing model systems. Dr. Gee is an excellent speaker so with the help of one of our graduates, Rick Discenza, who works in our office I determined that when Dr. Gee gives a speech, he speaks at an average clip of 2.5 words per second (slightly higher than average) and with bursts up to 3 words per second. My other thought was to treat this assignment the way many of you students treated your courses: I got the notes from someone who'd taken this class before. I wrote my colleague Kevin Boyle in History and said "I'm doing this commencement gig, would you be willing to share your speech with me?" To my surprise he sent it right over and I got through the first page and he was knee-deep into the Constitution and the American Dream and I thought, "Man, this is good stuff... And then... I'm not sure if I belong in this class." At that moment, I realized that I'm less Thoreau "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams..." and more Will Rogers (who came from my hometown of Claremore, Oklahoma) "I never met a man I didn't like". Or, if I might paraphrase: "I never met a student I didn't like... although a few have tried my patience"

One of the things that got me here today is a reputation for working well with students and I take pride in that. Some of the awards I've won are listed in the program but there is another set of awards that I don't publicize, they are instead stuck to the side of my file cabinet in my office and represent what past senior classes of chemical engineers thought of me. Early on, I had awards for giving the hardest exams (which I was sadistically proud of), then I got one for being the friendliest professor (so I thought I was going soft), and then I got the one that really captured my style quite starkly and that I'm sure might have jeopardized my selection as speaker: "Professor Potty Mouth". I was a repeat winner the following year. Fortunately for all of us here today, I have since expanded my vocabulary in more appropriate ways.

In his closing remarks President Gee will tell you "Don't forget your alma mater, because we won't forget you." If he holds form that phrase will come out in about 3 seconds so listen fast! My message to you today is that that statement is absolutely true. The faculty look upon all of you as extensions of our families. For our graduate students we even construct family trees of our PhD advisors back through time. My own academic family tree goes back in this

country to the turn of the 20th century, then as with many in the chemical sciences it spends a century or two in Germany and eventually traces back to a Professor of mathematics, Greek philosophy and medicine, Nicola da Loniga at Padua, Italy in the 15th century. I also discovered an academic uncle who is currently Dean of the School of Art & Design (not engineering) at that school up north. This career as professor becomes so entwined with our personal lives that we think of you as our own children. I have been fortunate to teach students at every level here from freshmen to graduate students. So today I wanted to spend this short time reminiscing about your time here at Ohio State and giving you a little taste of the view from the front of the class. In what follows I have omitted last names of my surrogate children because frankly, the last names are the only part of the story that has changed over the years. I'm sure you will see a little bit of someone you know.

You come in as freshmen wide-eyed and enthusiastic. Some of you unsure of what you want to do and some of you absolutely confident that the grading scale starts at A and ends at A-minus. Together we dispelled that myth rather quickly.

When you reach the sophomore year you've sort of figured out campus and classes and some are still guessing at a major. In class, there is the overwhelming fear that comes over you when you realize you just spent 5 hours working on a single homework problem and there are 5 more to go and then there is homework in 2 other classes. Sophomore year is also when you start to test your own personal theories of sleep deprivation. We know all the signs of sleeping in class: sunglasses, baseball cap, glazed eyes staring straight ahead... In my classes on the first day, I ask students to let me know when they are going to miss class for ANY reason. Your honesty is as refreshing as it is telling: Alex Z once wrote me an email: "Hi Dr Tomasko, I slept through class because I fought the terrorists in Command & Conquer until 4 in the morning."

Juniors have long been my favorite to teach. You've reached a comfort level with the faculty where you talk back but you're still working hard because graduation is not yet a sure thing. It is at this point that personalities start to bloom. There is what I have come to describe as the "verbal learner". You recognize them as the person who asks all the questions – sometimes pre-emptively. I was sure that Chris H had a spring loaded arm and was going to need rotator cuff surgery before we finished the quarter of thermodynamics. And sometimes, priorities baffle me. We are all familiar with the college equivalent of work-life balance, i.e. the study-party balance. Patrick Z made a decision that his girlfriends 21st birthday party trumped my 8:30 exam the next morning. That one unfortunately cost him the course – but he still graduated – eventually.

Then we get to your senior year – including those of you on a "victory lap". There are now total strangers coming into my class, no hats, piercings, or visible tattoos. Only tasteful suits, skirts, and ties with the coordinating dress Nikes and then I realize – Ah, Career Fair. The faculty have now become an amusement to some and a lifeline for others needing a reference letter. The majority have built meaningful relationships that, we hope, will last a lifetime. But for the moment we are the last barriers between you and that most meaningful of ceremonies: Senior Crawl. Truthfully, we are touched by the messages that follow this day – announcements of weddings, births, jobs, promotions and every now and then the ones like Charlie B sent this past October nonchalantly informing me that he had recently left his job to pursue an MBA at some obscure school called Harvard University.

Today is not only a milestone. It is the time in your life that you will refer to at some point in the future when you too start a sentence with the phrase, "When I was your age...". The exciting part of that phrase is thinking about what might come next:

- "When I was your age we had to wear glasses to watch 3D TV"
- "When I was your age we had to plug our appliances into the wall to get power"
- "When I was your age we actually had to *drive* the car instead of just telling it where to go."

Those changes in your way of life will come fast and yet a few things will undoubtedly remain the same... The price of a gallon fuel for your personal jet pack will be something-something POINT 9 cents. And we still won't have a playoff in major college football.

My challenge to you as you leave here is simple: Live your life as an educated citizen. As society debates the impact of nanotechnology, climate change, and TSA whole-body scans, please exercise your right to look at the data yourself. Google scholar gives you the world at your fingertips so take advantage. Even Wikipedia is rapidly becoming a reliable source of information. Recognize that technology is not the sole domain of the engineers just as governance is not the sole domain of the political scientists. Citizenship is communal - and civil - and often messy. Along the way, you will find that the difficult times are the ones from which you will learn the most. With that in mind I wish for you some difficulties that will grow into perspective and eventually ripen into blessings:

- I wish for you the hunger ... of having to order a meal in a place where you don't speak the language.
- I wish for you the nervousness ... of having to decide about changing jobs or careers.
- I wish for you the frustration ... of listening to community or government leaders charting a path that you disagree with.
- I wish for you the torment ... of realizing that the person who must speak up is you.

The author E.B. White, who wrote *Charlotte's Web*, once said: "I rise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it very difficult to plan the day."

So finally, I wish for you a lifetime of difficulty ... in planning your day.

Good luck and Go Bucks!